5-11-2015

Seeing the Sacred

Emily Potter
Western Kentucky University, emily.potter257@topper.wku.edu

SEEING THE SACRED

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

Emily Potter

*****

Western Kentucky University

2015

CE/T Committee:

Professor Elizabeth Gish, Advisor

Professor Matthew Tullis

Professor Audra Jennings

Approved by

_____

Dr. Elizabeth Gish

Honors College

ABSTRACT

Seeing the Sacred is a multidisciplinary arts project exploring the purposes of sacred art and its relationship with community identity. The project highlights three common purposes of sacred art: to represent a worldview, to express identities as members of a community, and to connect with something bigger than ourselves. This Capstone Experience/Thesis Project developed through an intersection of three primary interests: visual art, community engagement, and religious studies. This project includes an overview of the CE/T's origins and evolution, a written analysis of research goals and experiences, a review of relevant literature, a series of related artwork, and a collaborative community art project. The analysis details the development of those research interests, objectives, and questions, and the completion of the final project.

Keywords: art, public art, community-based art, religious, sacred

Dedicated to Abigail Potter

tireless research assistant, late-night writing buddy, sister extraordinaire

"In normal life we hardly realize how much more we receive than we give, and life cannot be rich without such gratitude. It is so easy to overestimate the importance of our own achievements compared with what we owe to the help of others." Dietrich Bonhoeffer

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the support and inspiration of so many people. I would like to thank Dr. Elizabeth Gish, my CE/T advisor, for her creative insight, ceaseless guidance, and constant encouragement throughout this process. I am also grateful to the other members of my committee, Matthew Tullis and Dr. Audra Jennings, for their valuable time and advice.

I would like to acknowledge the Honors College for its mission to encourage the development of an engaged scholarly community and to support WKU students and faculty in their pursuit of academic excellence. I would also like to thank the Office of Academic Affairs, the Office of Scholar Development, and the WKU Sisterhood for the generous financial assistance through the FUSE and Lifetime Experience grant programs that made my travel and work possible.

Finally, I would like to thank my incredible network of family and friends for their unending support, reassurance, and coffee; the Presbyterian Church of Bowling Green for encouraging my endeavors and allowing me to be a part of the team; Terry Shoemaker for his valuable inspiration and sage advice; Brent Dedas for his instruction and artistic guidance; and Teresa Christmas for the use of exhibit space at Art Matters Community Art Studio.

VITA

March 8, 1993 ..... Born – Valparaiso, Indiana
2011 ..... Bowling Green High School, Bowling Green, Kentucky
Spring 2012 ..... ESL Tutor, Cumberland Trace Elementary, Bolwing Green, Kentucky
2013-2014 ..... Peer Mentor, WKU Honors College
2013-2014 ..... Public Achievement Coach, Bowling Green High School
March 2014 ..... "Public Achievement" presentation, WKU REACH Week
2014-2015 ..... Youth and college intern, Presbyterian Church of Bowling Green, Kentucky
2015 ..... Accepted to WKU Religious Studies Master of Arts Program
March 2015 ..... "Seeing the Sacred" presentation, WKU REACH Week
April 24, 2015 ..... CE/T Defense
May 16, 2015 ..... Undergraduate Graduation

PUBLICATIONS

1. Shoemaker, Terry, James Hughes, Megan Maddern, Farrin Marlow, and Emily Potter. "The Mason Jar Mentality: Conservative Protestantism & Interfaith Cooperation in the American South." Journal of Inter-Religious Studies, no. 15 (2014): 83-89. http://irdialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Document-8-Mason-Jar-many-researchers.pdf.

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Interdisciplinary Studies

Concentration: Arts

LIST OF FIGURES

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This Capstone Experience/Thesis Project developed through an intersection of three primary interests of mine: (1) visual art, (2) community engagement, and (3) religious studies. The following analysis will detail the development of my research interests, objectives, and questions, and the completion of my project. An Interdisciplinary Studies major, I have spent the better part of my time at WKU learning to negotiate different fields of study and synthesize my interests into a coherent body of work. Since I began developing My Capstone Experience/Thesis, the themes and scope of my project have shifted significantly over time as a result of my evolving academic interests as well as unforeseen life events. As I will explain further, I chose to alter the direction of my project over time to incorporate new ideas and experiences into my research, and to account for disruption after my initial research plan was cancelled due to a car accident.

My academic interest in community engagement and public work originated during my first semester of college. I began school at WKU in the fall of 2011 and was enrolled that semester in Honors 251: *Citizen & Self*, a class that asks students to explore the tension between our identities as individuals and our identities as members of communities—locally, nationally, and globally.[1] The class emphasizes problem-solving

[1] For more on the Citizen and Self course see: Elizabeth Gish and Paul Markham, "Living Well Together: Citizenship, Education, and Moral Formation," *The Good Society* 22, no. 2 (2013); Alexander Olson, Elizabeth Gish, and Terry Shoemaker. “Citizen Stories: A

skills and different ways in which we can learn to live better together. I developed a final project for Citizen and Self that combined my interests in art and community engagement. It was a collaborative mural created through the joint efforts of WKU students and local high-school students. Through that experience I learned about organizing and project development; about communicating with and motivating a diverse group of people; I learned how to handle logistical challenges like locating supplies, getting participants to show up to meetings and events on time, and figuring out the best way to transport the giant wooden frames on which the murals were painted. There were almost twenty of us working together on that project. That means twenty different artistic visions and goals, twenty different styles of painting, twenty different ways of thinking about what matters and how best to communicate it. Despite the challenges, I noticed that something happens when people paint together. We did not always know how the project was going to work out, we did not always know what we were doing, and we made a huge mess. But in the end, we looked around and saw that we had created something new together. It felt good to bring together our skills—to bring what we knew—and make something meaningful.

Following the success of that project, I chose community-based art as the general topic for my CE/T. From that point, I started reading and experiencing public art and experimenting with community organizing.

With the support of my advisors over the next several semesters, I developed a plan to investigate public and community-based art in Amman, Jordan. I was studying Arabic at the time, and the trip would have given me a chance to work on my Arabic

---

New Path to Culture Change," *Public: A Journal of Imagining America*, forthcoming, 2015.

skills as well as an opportunity to discover what people were doing and saying with art in the city. I wanted to know how people used visual means to say things about themselves, about their city, and about their culture and experiences. I chose Jordan because it was an Arabic-speaking country with a rich artistic heritage and accessible study-abroad opportunities for American university students. Compared to many Middle-Eastern countries, Jordan's government remains stable, and the city of Amman is a relatively safe destination for international visitors. It also gave me the opportunity to be a part of and contribute to a richer and important conversation about art, culture, and religion in a post-9/11 age. So often, conversations about the intersection of cultures lack the nuance and complexity that they deserve. Through this trip to Jordan, I sought to broaden my perspectives on these sensitive issues and gain a fuller appreciation for navigating diverse cultural communities. I planned to travel with a program organized by International Studies Abroad, an organization that cooperates with universities around the world to arrange study abroad opportunities for students. In addition to program requirements like intensive language classes, I planned to use my time in the city to explore art—museums, street art, student work, commercial art, public installations, professional and amateur collections. In this first iteration of my research project, I wanted to talk directly with artists and to ask questions like 'How do you use art to describe and define your city?' 'How are important struggles and issues in your community expressed through the art that you make?' and 'How does the art you make shape the city?' I planned to use a citizen-journalist approach to meet people, ask questions, and experience the city's art, putting that research in conversation with the literature I was reading and my own art.[2] I

[2] Goode, Luke, "Social News, Citizen Journalism, and Democracy," *New Media and*

hoped to be able to contribute to a conversation about how communities understand themselves through art, with particular attention to art and its relationship to community, culture, and religion.

Besides community engagement and visual art, my academic interest in religion was also growing. Although not a part of my undergraduate requirements, I had taken several religion classes. One of them, a class offered through the WKU Institute for Citizenship and Social Responsibility[3] called "Religion and the Public Sphere," brought my classmates and me into contact with diverse faith groups within the Bowling Green community. My interaction with those groups, particularly the Bowling Green Islamic Center was an eye-opening experience, and left me with growing questions about the ways in which these distinct groups construct and shape communal identities and situate themselves within the broader community.[4]

Additionally, a friend of mine and an instructor at WKU asked me to assist him in planning and leading an adult Sunday school class at The Presbyterian Church of Bowling Green[5]. The theme of the class was *sacred art*. The class lasted only four weeks, but the experience had a considerable influence on my thoughts about art, expression, and religious communities. I started thinking about the word "sacred" and the concept of

---

Society 11, no. 8 (2011).

[3] Institute for Citizenship and Social Responsibility (ICSR), Homepage, https://www.wku.edu/icsr/

[4] Shoemaker, Terry, James Hughes, Megan Maddern, Farrin Marlow, and Emily Potter. "The Mason Jar Mentality: Conservative Protestantism & Interfaith Cooperation in the American South." Journal of Inter-Religious Studies, no. 15 (2014): 83-89. http://irdialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Document-8-Mason-Jar-many-researchers.pdf.

[5] The Presbyterian Church of Bowling Green, www.bgpres.org.

sacred space, sacred time, and sacred work. All of these factors shaped the development of my project.

My CE/T project has three major components:

1) My written thesis which includes a literature review, description of my field research, description of my art project, various sketches and pictures from my research, and a description of a course on sacred art that I created and taught;

2) The curriculum on sacred art that I developed and taught;

3) A final exhibit which showcased photos and sketches from my trip to Turkey, my paintings and artist statements, and the artwork that the students made along with their artist statements. This was displayed at Art Matters Community Art Studio in Bowling Green, Kentucky.[6]

[6] Art Matters, Community Art Studio, www.artmatterscommunitystudiogallery.com.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Because my project is interdisciplinary in nature, the preparatory research drew on a varied literature. I began by investigating ways of labeling, discussing, and evaluating art. George Dickie and Paul Dimaggio attempt to provide criteria for classifying and evaluating art in their respective works *Evaluating Art* and *Classification in Art*.[78] Dickie synthesizes the work of philosophers and art critics to highlight several theories of art evaluation. Dimaggio offers a more sociological perspective, relating a culture's artistic production and classification to social structures.

Initially, I focused on resources regarding public and community-based art. In *Art, Community and Environment: Educational Perspectives*, for example, Coutts and Jokela bring together international case studies that examine community engagement, cooperative art initiatives, and issues of location and environment.[9] In *Community Art: An Anthropological Perspective*, Kate Crehan sheds light on community-based art efforts through an ethnographic evaluation of Free Form Arts Trust, an organization of studio artists that works to make art a collaborative, accessible resource for working-class

---

[7] George Dickie, *Evaluating Art* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

[8] Paul Dimaggio, "Classification in Art," *American Sociological Review 52*, no. 4 (1987): 440-455.

[9] Glen Coutts and Timo Jokela, *Art, Community and Environment: Educational Perspectives,* (Bristol: Intellect Ltd, 2010).

communities and other demographics typically excluded from the world of fine art.[10] "Creating Community: Art for Community Development" and "Using the Arts in Community Organizing and Community Building" also explain the success of arts-based initiatives in community-organizing projects.[1112] In the article "Art and Community Development," author Alan Kay argues that the arts can be used to help rebuild, strengthen, and define local communities around the world[13]. He uses examples from Australia, Ireland, the United States, and the United Kingdom to illustrate his point. Kay identifies variables that are necessary for a successful community arts project, like recognition and appreciation by policymakers and community members and "ownership" by the local community, and explains why this matters in a modern, globalized world. Similarly, "A Picture's Worth a Thousand Words: Engaging Youth in CBPR Using the Creative Arts" demonstrates the usefulness of arts-projects in community partnerships.[14] Tony Newman, Katherine Curtis and Jo Stephens analyze the efficacy of community-

---

[10] Kate Crehan, *Community Art: An Anthropological Perspective,* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012).

[11] Seana Lowe, "Creating Community: Art for Community Development," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. no. 3 (2000): 357-386. 10.1177/089124100129023945.

[12] Marian McDonald, Jennifer Sarche, and Caroline C. Wang, "Using the Arts in Community Organizing and Community Building," *Community Organizing and Community Building for Health* (2005): 346.

[13] Alan Kay, "Art and Community Development: The Role the Arts Have in Regenerating Communities," *Community Development Journal* 35, no. 4 (2000): 463-469. www.jstor.org/stable/3235362.

[14] Michael Yonas, Jessica Burke, Kimberly Rak, and Antoine Bennett, "A Picture's Worth a Thousand Words: Engagement Youth in CBPR Using the Creative Arts," *Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, and Action*. no. 4 (2009): 349-358.

based arts projects in their article "Do Community-Based Arts Projects Result in Social Gains? A Review of the Literature."[15]

In "What Is Public Art?: Time, Place and Meaning," Hilde Hein explains the collective nature of public art in contrast to private art forms: "art is taken to be the product of an individual and an autonomous act of expression, and its appreciation is, likewise, a private act of contemplation. By contrast, as a public phenomenon, art must entail the artists' self-negation and deference to a collective community."[16] Any research into public art necessarily includes discussion of space and place. "One Place After Another: Site Specificity and Locational Identity" analyzes several high-profile examples of public art to discuss ways in which people evaluate art within its physical context.[17] Similarly, "Public Art and the Spaces of Democracy" and *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*," explore questions of location and place in public art.[18] "Art and Public Space: Questions of Democracy" and *Dialogues in Public Art* provide additional commentary on public art forms.[19] "Democracy and Art: A Happy

---

[15] Tony Newman, Katherine Curtis, and Jo Stephens, "Do Community-based Arts Projects Result in Social Gains? A Review of the Literature," *Community Development Journal*. no. 4 (2003): 310-322. 10.1093/cdj/38.4.310.

[16] Hilde Hein, "What Is Public Art?: Time, Place, and Meaning," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* no. 1 (1996): 1-7. www.jstor.org/stable/431675.

[17] Kwon Miwon, "One Place After Another: Site Specificity and Locational Identity," *MIT Press* (2002): 1-39.

[18] Pamela Lee, "Public Art and the Spaces of Democracy," *Assemblage* no. 35 (1998): 80-86. www.jstor.org/stable/3171240; Lucy Lippard and Robert Dawson, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997).

[19] Rosalyn Deutsche, "Art and Public Space: Questions of Democracy," *Social Text* (1992): 34-53. www.jstor.org/stable/466433; Lucy Lippard, and Robert Dawson, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997).

Marriage?" further investigate the concept of public art, asking questions about the intersection of art and democracy.[20]

In researching public art, I also looked into resources on the topic of street art, which includes unsanctioned forms of public art, like graffiti. "Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplaces" and "Street Art, Sweet Art? Reclaiming the 'Public' in Public Art" explore the contemporary significance of street art in the public sphere.[2122] These were particularly relevant for research in Amman, but became less so once my project goals shifted. However, they remain useful for their descriptions of the process of bringing expressive art into public space and everyday life. Also specific to my proposed work in Amman, I explored the citizen-journalist approach to information gathering. Luke Goode explains the increasingly widespread concept of "citizen journalism" from a media perspective. According to Goode, citizen-journalism is (1) not an exclusively online phenomenon, (2) not confined to explicitly 'alternative' news sources, and (3) includes 'metajournalism' as well as the practices of journalism itself. Citizen journalism operates democratically and horizontally within the public sphere.[23]

Assessing this assortment of literature informed my perceptions of public and community-based art. Although I have been fortunate enough to have access to arts education and experiences throughout my life—art history classes, museums and

---

[20] Charles Hersch, "Democracy and Art: A Happy Marriage?" *Polity* no. 3 (2000): 463-469. www.jstor.org/stable/325362.

[21] Nicholas Riggle, "Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplaces," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* no. 3 (2010): 243-257.

[22] Luca Visconti, John Sherry, Stephania Borghini, and Laurel Anderson. "Street Art, Sweet Art? Reclaiming the 'Public' in Public Place," *Journal of Consumer Research* no. 3 (2010): 511-529. www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/652731.

[23] Goode, "Social News, Citizen Journalism, and Democracy,".

galleries, hands-on experiences, art in public spaces—the scholarship I read in preparation for my project challenged my perspectives and pushed my ideas about what art is and how we use it. Reviewing different definitions and discussions of art shaped the way that I experienced art as a viewer during my time spent abroad and as a creator during the completion of my projects at home. The literature on methods and effectiveness of art education and community-based arts initiatives were useful resources as I developed my own art-centered curriculum.

CHAPTER 3

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT: EXPERIENCE AS RESEARCH

During the second semester of my junior year, I continued to dig into the preliminary research, narrow my objectives, refine my questions, and prepare for travel. At the end of that semester, however, my plans changed dramatically. Right before the semester ended—right before I was supposed to leave the country—I was involved in a serious car accident. I sustained significant physical injuries including a concussion, and as a result, all of my summer plans were cancelled—including the research trip. I could no longer travel to Jordan to conduct research for my CE/T, and it quickly became clear that salvaging my project would require substantial revision.

The following summer I began the long process of healing, remembering, and discovery. Rather than treat my accident as a disruption of my research and journey, I have come to see it as part of it. While, on one hand, my research project was far from my mind, those experiences undoubtedly shaped the development of my ideas and the direction of my work. The months following my accident were filled with the slow work of recovery. Physical difficulties and limited mobility coupled with lingering focus and memory issues from the concussion prolonged the healing process. Through those trauma experiences, I was reminded of the strength of the communities of which I am a part—my family, my friends, my faith community, my coworkers, and my school. I gained a fresh awareness of the stability, reliability, and resourcefulness of the people around me. That

theme—strength through unity and the power of an interconnected community—was certainly not a new concept to me, but my experiences brought it into sharper clarity.

New Beginnings

As terrible as the setback was, it gave me time to think about sacred art—that idea that had begun germinating in the spring. The following semester I took more religion classes and began researching Byzantine religious art for one of them. Over the course of the semester, as I was reshaping my thesis, it became clear that sacred art was what I wanted to investigate. And to do that, I still needed to travel and experience art.

As well as shifting my research focus to religious and sacred art forms, I also altered the direction of my project. Instead of focusing primarily on the experiences of successful artists, I became more interested in the hands-on process of facilitating community-based art.

Sacred Art

In addition to the literature I had been gathering on public and community-based art, I began to pursue literature about religious—specifically Christian—art. In *Art and Soul: Signpost for Christians in the Arts,* "spiritual" art is described as "art used in the service of the church, art containing religious subject-matter, art as a bridge to the spiritual realm, art as reflection of divine beauty, art as an echo of divine creativity."[24] In this sense, and in these communities, art is deeply tied to spirituality: "art is a bridge between the natural and the supernatural, between the earthly and the spiritual. Many of

[24] Hilary Brand and Adrienne Chaplin, *Art and Soul: Signposts for Christians in the Arts*, (2nd ed. Carlisle: Piquant, 2001): p 88.

the things we associate with art—beauty, permanence, mystery, perfection—are qualities that are equally characteristic of God in heaven."[25] In fact, this concept of art as a bridge between the heavenly and the mundane has been central to Christian art traditions since the earliest examples. John of Damascus, a writer from the seventh century wrote of religious icons as representative of the intimate connection between earth and heaven—between the material world and "the creator of matter who for my sake became material and deigned to dwell in matter, who through matter effected my salvation."[26]

It is within a combination of religious and community-based art that I situate "sacred art". In my discussion of sacred art, I will draw primarily from examples of religious art, but sacred art is by no means confined to religion. In fact, discussions of public art often take on a sacred significance regardless of whether or not the works of art fit within particular religious traditions. For examples, Jean Clottes, a French expert of prehistoric art describes his first encounter with a collection of prehistoric cave paintings as a spiritual experience: "I remember standing in front of the paintings of the horses facing the rhinos and being profoundly moved by the artistry. Tears were running down my cheeks. I was witnessing one of the world's great masterpieces."[27] Public or community-based art and religious art is by no means mutually exclusive. Rather, the two are closely related. The majority of religious art is "public," and the contemporary concept of public art draws heavily from historical traditions of religious art: "today's public artworks still have conceptual links with such traditional art forms as the medieval

---

[25] Brand and Chaplin, *Art and Soul: Signposts for Christians in the Arts,* 88.

[26] Mary Gerhart, *The Christianity Reader,* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007): 346.

[27] Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2003).

cathedral and the mural and the temple ruins of ancient Mexican and Latin American civilizations."[28]

For the purposes of my project, I identify three common functions of sacred art: (1) to represent a worldview, (2) to express our identities as members of a community, and (3) to connect us with something bigger than ourselves.

First, sacred art expresses a worldview. Based on examples of Medieval Christian stained glass windows or Eastern Orthodox iconography, it is evident how "closely tied theology and the arts can be."[29] Often, though not always, sacred art conveys an overt, intentional representation of the worldview of the artist or community. For example, great icons of the Orthodox Christian tradition are created using a "pictorial language" that represents the "founding dogmas of the holy image" tradition[30]. Every element of an icon—the materials, perspective, proportion, composition, colors, and brushstrokes—is representative of the theology of the Orthodox Church. In iconography, "symbolism is the expression of individual spiritual realities through visible material realities."[31]

Second, sacred art expresses our identities as members of a community. Frequently, modern Western conceptions of art focus on "the autonomous individual, glorified in the person of the artist," but sacred art is communal.[32] In an analysis of the art of the third-century Christian community at Dura in Syria, Walton describes the

---

[28] Hein, "What Is Public Art?: Time, Place, and Meaning," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. no. 1 (1996): 1.

[29] Garcia-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art*.

[30] Gilles Weissmann, *Techniques of Traditional Icon Painting* (Tunbridge Wells, Kent: Search Press, 2012), 12.

[31] Weissmann, *Traditional Icon Painting,* 12

[32] Hein, "What Is Public Art?: Time, Place, and Meaning," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. no. 1 (1996): 1.

importance of community identity in sacred art: "The importance of art to this early Christian community is connected to its understanding of liturgy as an intentional, corporate activity rather than as a private, individual exercise."[33] This feature of sacred art is not a new phenomenon. In explaining the context of public art, Hein describes the historical and cross-cultural importance of art as expression of collective identity:

> "It is interesting to observe that the recognized art of nearly all cultures, including that of the western European tradition prior to the late renaissance, embraces just such a collective model, indulging the differences among individuals as variant manifestations of a common spirit. The celebrated treasures of Greece and Rome, as well as the Christian works of the Middle Ages and the age of fresco that succeeded them, do not exalt the private vision of individual artists so much as they bespeak the shared values and convictions of cultural communities, and are accordingly to be found in those edifices and open places where people regularly commemorate those same values and convictions."[34]

Third, sacred art connects us to something bigger than ourselves. "Religious art, in a deep sense, not only concerns itself with divine presence but also concerns itself in making present the reality of heaven."[35] In this sense, sacred art expresses both the immanent and the transcendent. Creating art is an intimate, immediate practice through which we may be fully in the present, but it is also a timeless process by which we may appreciate the context of our work beyond individual experience. My research into sacred art will inform my future work in community endeavors like churches, art

---

[33] Janet Walton, *Art and Worship: A Vital Connection* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1988).

[34] Hein, "What Is Public Art?: Time, Place, and Meaning," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. no. 1 (1996): 1.

[35] Garcia-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art*.

initiatives, or non-profit organizations, by helping me to articulate the ways in which art helps us to make sense of the immanent and the transcendent.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH ABROAD

After my plans for Jordan were interrupted, I was able to arrange an alternate research trip to investigate examples of sacred art in an international context. It was particularly important to me to get out of a U.S. context in order to gain a new perspective. I wanted to be able to see things differently and in particular to develop a sensitivity to art in a different cultural and religious context.

In January 2015, I left for Turkey. Of all the places in the world, Istanbul seemed like the perfect city to explore sacred art and community identity. Istanbul is a city of boths: it is both Eastern and Western, both religious and secular, both ancient and modern. I absorbed as much art as I could. There was Christian, Islamic and Jewish art and architecture. There was ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary art. There were museums, places of worship, mosaics, tile-work, calligraphy, sculpture, monasteries, frescos, paper marbling, textiles and rugs. Even the city felt like a kind of art. Its busyness and diversity creates a rich and colorful texture. The hectic city sounds are punctuated by the regular rhythm of the *muezzin*'s daily calls to prayer. Istanbul was full of art, and the art told a story about a changing city—about complex, evolving identities.

The trip lasted almost three weeks. During that time I stayed in hostels, living in close quarters with backpackers from other countries and meeting local residents. I spent each day exploring the city. Some days were focused on museums and historical attractions—the Istanbul Archaeology Museum, Galata Tower, the Aya Sofya, the

Basilica Cistern, Topkapi Palace, and others. Other days, I visited places of worship including the Sultanahmet Mosque and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. I sampled spices from Turkish markets, watched tourists in the squares, bought bread and cheese from persistent street vendors, chatted with shop owners, dodged street cats, and journaled over Turkish coffee in corner cafes.

Five days of the trip were spent away from Istanbul in the rural region of Cappadocia. I stayed in Goreme, a Cappadocian village. Goreme is home to striking volcanic rock formations, an ancient underground city, historical churches, mosques, and monastic dwellings, cave- and rock-cut homes, and a different perspective of Turkish culture than that of Istanbul. The pace of everyday life in Cappadocia is less frantic than the city. The food, clothing, traditional crafts demonstrated more Central-Asian influence than what I experienced on the European side of Istanbul.

My experiences in Turkey—walking, seeing, listening, and participating—were invaluable to my research process. It was not the kind of research that is conducted in libraries and data bases or found in scholarly discourse, but the kind that can only be encountered face-to-face. Living in close contact with a new culture made the ideas I had been investigating into a reality. The abstract notions of community-engagement that I had been meditating on came to life for me through tangible interactions with neighbors, worshippers, painters, priests, salesmen, tourists, commuters, transit officials, and imams. My trip gave context to my preliminary research, shaped the questions I had been asking, inspired my artwork, and shaped the direction of my project. At the end of January I returned from Turkey and got to work. I began sorting through my photos, sketches, and

journal entries, trying to figure out the best way to produce something that captured the experience of my trip.

Figure 1: prayer candles, Ecumenical Patriarchate

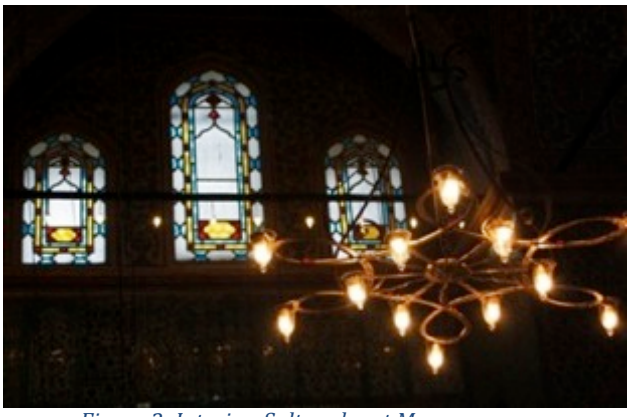

Figure 2: Interior, Sultanahmet Mosque

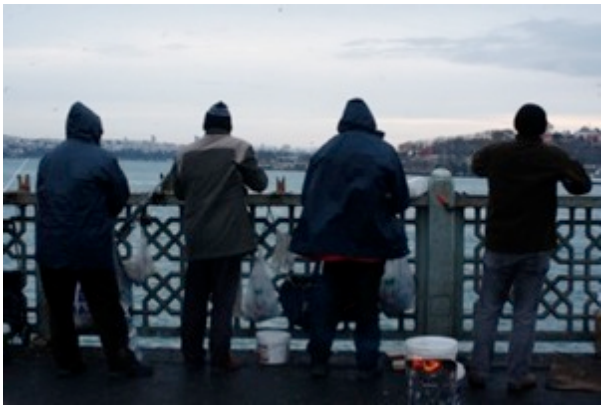

Figure 3: Fishermen on Galata Bridge

Figure 4: Central dome, Pammakaristos Church

Figure 5: Streetart, Beyoglu

Figure 6: Ishtar Gate, Istanbul Archaeology Museum

Figure 7: Beyoglu

Figure 8: Christ Pantocrator, South Gallery, Ayasofya Museum

Figure 9: Central dome, Hagia Triada

Figure 10: Turkish pottery

Figure 11: Spices, Grand Bazaar

Figure 12: Volcanic rock formations, Cappadocia

Figure 13: Stained glass, Hagia Triada

Figure 14: Red Emotional Globe, Olafur Eliasson, Istanbul Modern

Figure 15: Sultanahmet Mosque

Figure 16: Evil eye charms, Goreme

Figure 17: Street art, Taksim

Figure 18: Eyup Sultan Mosque

Figure 19: Spice Market

Figure 20: Iconostasis, Hagia Triada

Figure 21: Eyup Cemetery

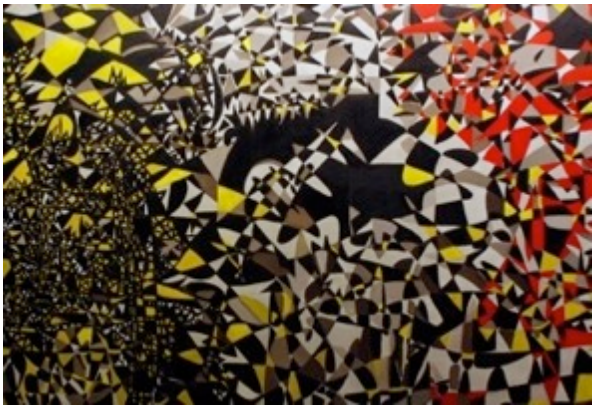

Figure 22: My Hell, Princess Fahrelnissa Zeid, Istanbul Modern

Figure 23: Iconostasis, Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople

Figure 24: Rock-cut house, Cappadocia

Figure 25: Interior, Sultanahmet Mosque

Figure 26: Karakoy fish market

Figure 27: Sketch, Ayasofya fountain

Figure 28: Sketch, figures

Figure 29: Sketch, figure and shapes

Figure 30: Concept, angel diptych

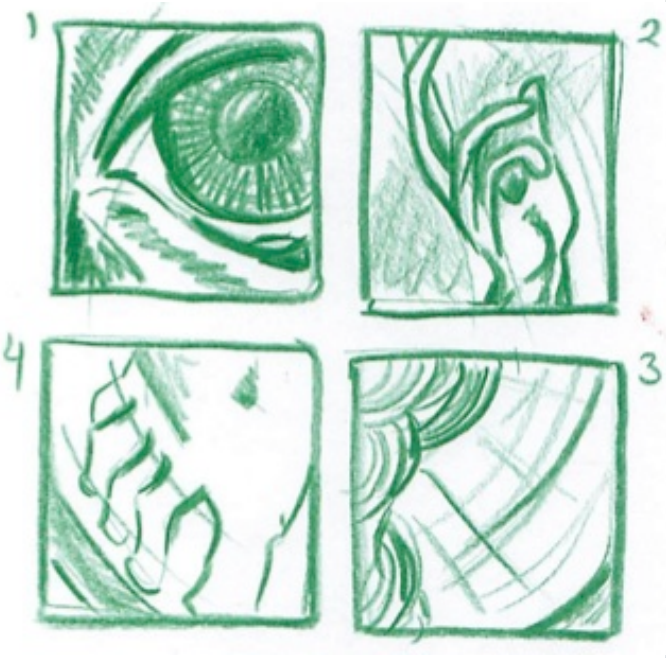

Figure 31: Concept, isolations

Figure 32: Sketch, circles

Figure 33: Sketch, curls

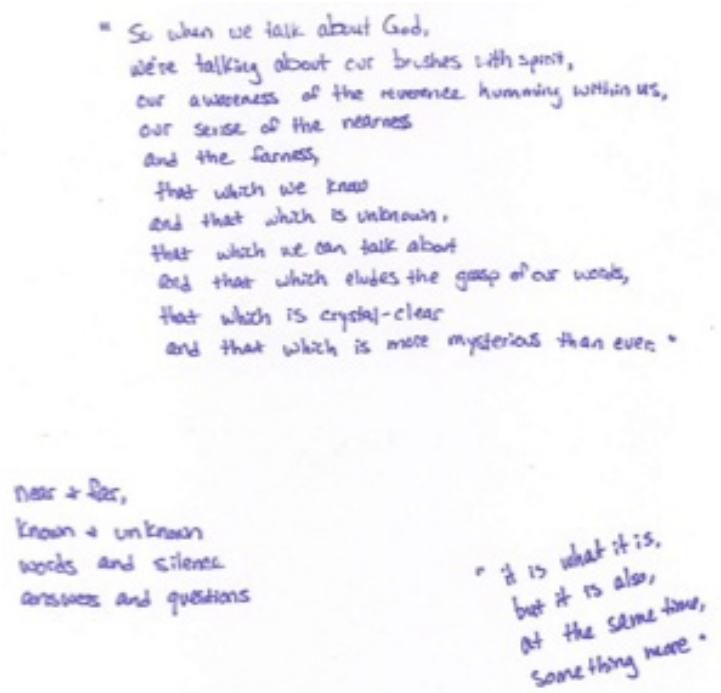

Figure 34: Notes, What We Talk About When We Talk About God, by Rob Bell

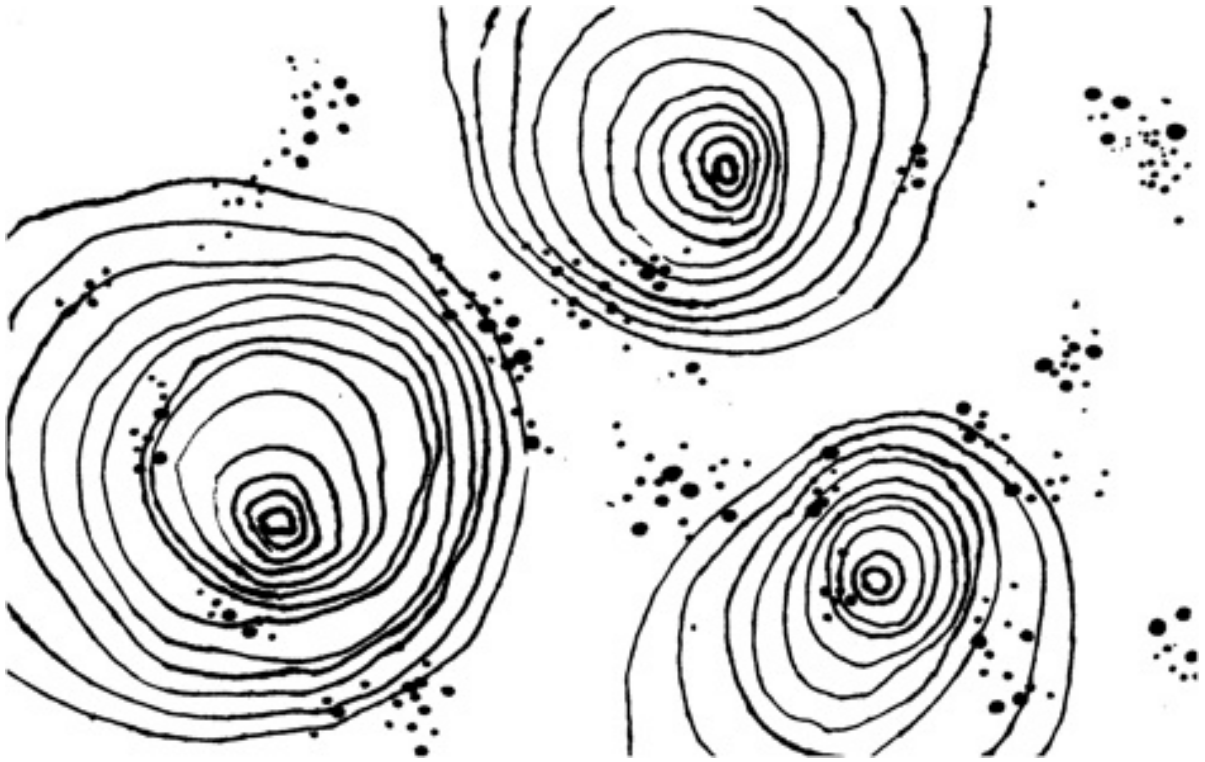

Figure 35: Sketch, rings

Figure 36: Sketch, halo

Figure 37: Sketch, shoulder

Figure 38: Sketch, eyes

Figure 39: Sketch, iris

Figure 40: Sketch, closed hand

Figure 41: Sketch, open hand

Figure 42: Sketch, mandala

Figure 43: Sketch, colored halo

Figure 44: Sketch, red mandala

CHAPTER 5

ARTIST STATEMENTS

As a result of my literature review and my experiences in Turkey, I began creating artwork inspired by the images I had seen and the themes I had been investigating. I drew inspiration from the tradition of Byzantine and Orthodox iconography and used that imagery to explore themes like interconnectedness and holism. My project references primarily Christian artistic traditions, but that is in no way indicative of the scope of sacred art. Sacred art is not confined to a particular place, time, genre, or religious tradition.

The project is a series of three works, each involving mixed media. The finished pieces were displayed at Art Matters Community Art Studio in Bowling Green, Kentucky in April, 2015. Included in the List of Figures that begins on page *vi* are photos from Turkey that have inspired my work as well as examples of sketches that illustrate the development of my ideas. I use bits and pieces—panels, sets, and mosaics. The materials are varied and include oils and acrylics, gold leaf, glass, wood, metal, and paper. The color palette inludes rich colors—reds, golds, deep blues, and greens. Blue is significant in the iconic tradition as a symbol of heaven or the divine nature, while red symbolizes the earth and human nature. The use of gold colors and metal leaf throughout the pieces are inspired by the frequent appearance of gilded surfaces and gold accents in religious ceremonial decoration, such as iconostases. Each individual piece contains certain unique qualities, and I combine those pieces to create something new—something bigger. While

drawing from Byzantine iconography, my artwork deviates significantly from tradition. Traditional iconography relies on mosaic, fresco, or in smaller applications, egg tempera. Each image is precisely and carefully planned and executed. My pieces, however, are done in a looser style. In some cases I use oil paint, thickly applied in a painterly fashion—a clear departure from the smooth, accurate brushwork of traditional iconography. In other cases, I use collage and a variety of media to create a patchwork appearance. The assemblage-quality of the works is intentional—each work represents a unified whole made up of a variety of small, individual pieces.

Figure 45: Isolation

The first piece in the set, *Isolation*, is made up of four identically sized square canvases. Each canvas shows one small section of a larger image—Christ Pantocrator (see Figures 4, 8, and 9). Christ Pantocrator (meaning "almighty") is the name of the most widely used image in Orthodox Christian iconography. In the Byzantine tradition, the Pantocrator icon is often displayed in the central dome of a church building. The canvases in this particular piece are painted with close-up sections of the Pantocrator image. One canvas shows a raised hand, one shows part of a foot, a third is an eye, and the fourth is a section of a halo. Individually these are isolated, disjointed elements. Taken together, however, a larger, more coherent image begins to emerge.

Figure 46: Intercession

The second piece, *Intercession*, is a diptych made from two birch plywood panels. The panels are two feet in width and three feet in length. Each panel presents a mirror image of the archangel Michael as typically depicted in Orthodox iconography (see Figure 31). The piece is done with mixed media—acrylic paint, paper, and gold leaf. The outline of the angel has been engraved into each panel and surrounded by gold leaf, as an allusion to the style and technique of Orthodox icon painting. Corresponding sections in each panel's design are left bare revealing the natural grain of the plywood and giving the piece an unfinished appearance. Taken individually, each panel is missing something—only in combination is it possible to understand the complete image.

Figure 47:Communion

Communion, the third piece, was inspired by the mandalas found in South Asian religious traditions as well as radial patterns and medallions found in traditional Christian art (see Figures 9, 13, 42, 43, and 44). Mandalas function as visual art as well as ritual and meditative objects. These designs are circular with radial balance, and contain repeated patterns of geometrical and floral shapes. Inspired by mosaics I encountered in Istanbul and the Cappadocia region of Turkey, the design of this circular piece is created through the careful placement of bits of glass, mirror, and other shards.

CHAPTER 6

TEACHING SACRED ART

The most important part of my project is a collaborative art experience. In the early part of 2015, I began teaching a class on sacred art to middle school students at the Presbyterian Church of Bowling Green.[36] The class consists of three parts: (1) introducing and defining sacred art, (2) exploring examples of sacred art around us, and (3) creating our own sacred art. The goal of the curriculum I have developed is to encourage the students to be creative, collaborative, and expressive. As I began planning the middle school class, Peter London's book *Step Outside: Community-Based Art Education* was a useful resource. According to London, community-based art education "is an attempt to promote self-discovery through firsthand encounter between children and their world."[37]

In order to encourage the students to engage with the class more creatively, I structured the space in such a way as to escape typical classroom-style teaching. Each Sunday evening when the youth group met, we moved the chairs out of the way and sat in a circle with pillows on the floor. I began class by passing out blank sheets of paper to everyone, along with colored pencils, crayons, and oil pastels. I asked the students to do a kind of creative note taking. They had the paper and the drawing utensils, and I encouraged them to put down anything that came to mind—they could write down

[36] The Presbyterian Church of Bowling Green, www.bgpres.org.

[37] Peter London, *Step Outside: Community-Based Art Education* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994).

important or thought-provoking things that we said and any questions they had. They could draw pictures of the things that we talked about or of other things that came to mind. The sketches could be objective or non-objective. They could draw figures, doodles or interesting colors and textures, for example. My goal was to get their hands moving with pencils on paper. I did this because I wanted them to begin thinking in terms of colors, shapes and images. Through this process, certain pictures and ideas and themes would come to the surface, and by looking back through their doodles, they were able to see some interesting things that they've been thinking about.

The first component of the class was introducing and defining sacred art. We spent our first meeting discussing the word *art* and the word *sacred*. I posed a variety of questions to the class:

- What comes to mind when you hear the word *art*?
- Do you like art?
- What examples of art can you think of?
- Do you ever make art?
- Do you consider yourself an artist?
- What makes art good? Is there such thing as bad art?

For inspiration, we looked at several dictionary definitions of art—there are many, but this is one that was particularly helpful: art is the "expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power".[38] Through our discussion, the students came up with their own words to add to the definition including *beautiful, productive, meaningful, symbolic, emotional, creative, imaginative,* and *important.*

[38] "Definition of Art." Merriam-Webster. January 1, 2015. www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/art.

Then we used the same process with the word *sacred*. I asked a similar set of questions:

- What comes to mind when you hear the word sacred?
- When or where do you usually hear this word?
- Is sacred the same thing as religious?
- What kinds of people use the word 'sacred' and what do they mean by it?
- Have you seen or experienced anything sacred this week?
- What kinds of things are sacred to you?

Again, the dictionary gave us many definitions to choose from, but these are some that we found helpful: A sacred thing is something that has been "dedicated or set apart", "devoted to a particular purpose". It's something "worthy of veneration," and my favorite—a sacred thing is something that "inspires awe or reverence."[39] The students added to the definition with words like *special*, *extraordinary*, *separate*, and *holy*.

From here, we attempted to create a working definition of "sacred art". When I talk about sacred art, I talk about it in terms of three primary purposes:

1. Sacred art reflects a worldview.
2. Sacred art expresses our individual and community identities.
3. Sacred art emphasizes a connection with something bigger than ourselves.

Even after discussing our working definition of sacred art, I expected rather traditional answers from the students when I asked them for examples of sacred art they have encountered. For example, many people might suggest things like a stained glass window, the Stations of the Cross, or other overtly religious works. To my surprise, however, the students' suggestions were wonderfully unconventional. One student suggested the Statue of Liberty, saying that it represents freedom and expresses our national identity. Another student suggested the Red Rocks Amphitheater. While perhaps

[39] "Definition of Sacred." Merriam-Webster. January 1, 2015. www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/art.

less obviously ‘art’ than other examples, the Red Rocks suggestion demonstrates that the students are thinking about the question in exactly the way I had hoped.

The next component of the class was exploring examples of sacred art. In this segment, I showed the students a sampling of sacred art through time and across different cultures. I started with Christian art, since that was most familiar to the class already. We explored early examples of art and decoration from the Catacombs in Rome; we looked at the Byzantine icon tradition; we looked at stained glass windows, gothic architecture, medieval illuminated manuscripts; we looked at modern examples of Christian art installations. From there, we examined a few examples of sacred art from other cultures and faiths. We talked about different kinds of Islamic art—arabesques, tile and mosaic, calligraphy and manuscripts. I showed the students pictures of Hindu and Buddhist mandalas, and we talked about the ritual and symbolic significance of the shapes and colors. We discussed Navajo sand painting and its connection to Navajo cosmology. I gave only a brief explanation of these examples because of time constraints, but nevertheless, the students were inspired by the photos. We were able to have productive discussion about symbolism, imagery, and what makes these examples *sacred*.

The third component was creating sacred art. For this part of the class the students made their own works of sacred art. I facilitated two projects. The first was an individual project. To begin, I asked them to start thinking about elements of design—colors, shapes, lines, textures, pattern. I prompted them with questions like “When you think about God, what colors do you think of?” “When you think about your community here at the church, or your community within your family, or your community in the city of Bowling Green, what shapes do you think of?” and “What pictures come to mind when

you think about yourself—your soul, the stuff that you're made up of?" This was very open-ended, and they could take project in different directions. This process was uncomfortable at first. Most people are not accustomed to thinking about questions of identity in this way—visually. This is one reason that I had been encouraging them to draw and color every week. The answers they gave to these questions guided the direction of their artwork. As an example, one student said that when she thinks about God, she thinks of the color blue, because that reminds her of heaven. Another student thought of green, because he associates that with living things and creation, and the world around us. Someone else said that when she thinks about her community, she imagines a circle—because to her, circles represent wholeness, which should characterize a healthy community. We spent a lot of time brainstorming this together, and sharing our ideas with each other. Eventually each student combined the elements they came up with to make interesting patterns and compositions. By the time they were done, each student had their own piece of art that represented something about them—how they see themselves, how they see other people, and what motivates and surrounds them.

The second project was collaborative. It was collage-style, drawing inspiration from the mosaics that they have been learning about. The vision for this project was to choose a theme or an issue together that appealed to the whole class—something that was important to them as a group. The students chose "love" as the theme. They created the image using magazine cutouts, photos, pictures from books, colored paper, and paint. We put the small pictures together to create a bigger picture—a larger image that, to them, represents the concept of love.

They titled the piece “The World in God’s Hands” and wrote an artists’ statement together:

> “God’s love is the theme of the collage. The globe is made up lots of different pictures because the world is made up of different things—cultures, people, animals, personalities, jobs, schools, religions, activities, friends, families, nature, communities, thoughts, loved ones, hobbies, ideas, and dreams. The variety of images represents the variety of God’s creation.”

Figure 48: The World in God’s Hands, collaborative collage

Developing this class was an exciting challenge. Translating the concepts of sacred art into manageable lessons for a middle school classroom gave me the

opportunity to reflect on my work and experiences in ways that would not have been possible solely through reading and writing. Facilitating the class required a combination of the skills and knowledge of art and community-engagement that I have gained, and allowed me to put my ideas into practice in a tangible way.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

As graduation nears, the completion of my Capstone experience/Thesis Project has given me time to reflect on my progress as a student and my development as a scholar. I am grateful for the diverse education that I have been fortunate enough to receive and for the interdisciplinary experiences that have shaped my work.

While it is the culmination of my research, this project is only the beginning of my work with sacred art. Art—sacred art, collaborative, community-based art, and the ways we use it to connect with each other and to the world around us—has been a gradually developing theme for me throughout my college experience. I have discovered the value of a healthy community, I have learned the importance of collaboration, I have participated in the good work of passionate people, and I have found that art can be a unique and valuable tool for communicating with the world around us and imagining a better one.

I hope that my work is inspiring to the people that see it and to the students with whom I have cooperated. If there is one final thing I hope to convey through this project, it is the idea that our work—whatever kind of art we make and the ways in which we choose to use our productivity and creativity—says something about what we value, and it matters to our communities. It connects us to the people around us—and that is something that should inspire awe and reverence.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brand, Hilary, and Adrienne Chaplin. *Art and Soul: Signposts for Christians in the Arts*. 2nd ed. Carlisle: Piquant, 2001: p 88.

Coutts, Glen, and Timo Jokela. *Art, Community and Environment: Educational Perspectives.* Bristol: Intellect Ltd, 2010.

Crehan, Kate. Community Art: An Anthropological Perspective. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012

"Definition of Art." Merriam-Webster. January 1, 2015. www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/art.

"Definition of Sacred." Merriam-Webster. January 1, 2015. www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/art.

Deutsche, Rosalyn. "Art and Public Space: Questions of Democracy." Social Text. (1992): 34-53. www.jstor.org/stable/466433.

Dickie, George. Evaluating art. Temple University Press, 2010.

Dimaggio, Paul. "Classification in Art." *American Sociological Review 52*, no. 4 (1987): 440-455.

Finkelpearl, Tom, and Vito Acconci. *Dialogues in public art*. MIT Press, 2001.

Garcia-Rivera, Alejandro. *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art*. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2003.

Gerhart, Mary. *The Christianity Reader.* Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007: 346.

Goode, Luke. "Social News, Citizen Journalism, and Democracy." *New Media and Society* 11, no. 8 (2011).

Hein, Hilde. "What Is Public Art?: Time, Place, and Meaning." The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism. no. 1 (1996): 1-7. www.jstor.org/stable/431675.

Hersch, Charles. "Democracy and Art: A Happy Marriage?." *Polity*. no. 3 (2000): 463-469. www.jstor.org/stable/325362.

Kay, Alan. “Art and Community Development: The Role the Arts Have in Regenerating Communities.” *Community Development Journal* 35, no. 4 (2000): 463-469. www.jstor.org/stable/3235362.

Lee, Pamela. “Public Art and the Spaces of Democracy.” Assemblage. no. 35 (1998): 80-86. www.jstor.org/stable/3171240.

Lippard, Lucy, and Robert Dawson. *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*. New York: The New Press, 1997.

London, Peter. *Step Outside: Community-Based Art Education*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994.

Lowe, Seana. “Creating Community: Art for Community Development.” Journal of Contemporary Ethnography. no. 3 (2000): 357-386. 10.1177/089124100129023945.

McDonald, Marian, Jennifer Sarche, and Caroline C. Wang. “Using the Arts in Community Organizing and Community Building.” *Community Organizing and Community Building for Health* (2005): 346.

Miwon, Kwon. “One Place After Another: Site Specificity and Locational Identity.” *MIT Press*. (2002): 1-39.

Newman, Tony, Katherine Curtis, and Jo Stephens. “Do Community-based arts projects result in social gains? A review if the literature.” *Community Development Journal*. no. 4 (2003): 310-322. 10.1093/cdj/38.4.310.

Presbyterian Church of Bowling Green, www.bgpres.org.

Riggle, Nicholas. “Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplaces.” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. no. 3 (2010): 243-257.

Visconti, Luca, John Sherry, Stephania Borghini, and Laurel Anderson. “Street Art, Sweet Art? Reclaiming the ‘Public’ in Public Place.” Journal of Consumer Research. no. 3 (2010): 511-529. www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/652731.

Walton, Janet. *Art and Worship: A Vital Connection.* Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1988.

Weissmann, Gilles. *Techniques of Traditional Icon Painting*. Tunbridge Wells, Kent: Search Press, 2012. 12.

Yonas, Michael, Jessica Burke, Kimberly Rak, and Antoine Bennett. “A Picture’s Worth a Thousand Words: Engagement Youth in CBPR Using the Creative Arts.”

Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, and Action. no. 4 (2009): 349-358.